

High Country News

KNOW THE WEST

Militias, MAGA activists and one border town's complicated resistance

How Arivaca, Arizona, became a magnet for anti-immigrant activists – and what locals did next.

Tay Wiles | March 13, 2019 | *From the print edition*

Weather rolls into Arivaca, Arizona, with plenty of warning. The community's 630 residents live in a desert valley with sweeping vistas, where gigantic cloud mosaics are constant and ever shifting with the wind.

For a long time, Arivaca has received outsiders looking to make it their own. It sits just 11 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, on land that was once the territory of the Tohono O'odham. The area's vast public lands are littered with defunct silver and gold mines. In the 1970s, hippies moved in, and later, a stream of retirees. "We have people that come to Arivaca just to get away from whatever they want to get away from," says librarian Mary Kasulaitis, a local historian and fourth-generation rancher.

For a hideout, though, it's pretty smack-dab in the middle of things. Almost everyone has a story about undocumented immigrants knocking on their door, desperate for water. Arivacans tell stories about bricks of pot dropped on their land to be carried north. Locals say smuggling has long been a tacit part of life here.

Yet Arivaca — a vibrant community of artists, families, ranchers and desert rats — tries not to let politics or the drug trade disrupt daily life. "Most people in Arivaca look at national and international politics as kind of a joke," says longtime resident Alan Wallen, 50, the founder of the town's cooperative

internet provider. “Here’s the thing about Arivaca. More and more, it became tolerant of different viewpoints. It evolved into a really odd mix of really tolerant people.” As one Tucson newspaper put it, Arivaca is “a live-and-let-live kind of town.”



In his home office in Arivaca, Arizona Border Recon Founder Tim Foley looks at photos from his excursions into the desert mountains along the Mexican border.

Andrew Cullen for High Country News

So it was significant when, in 2017, locals bristled at the arrival of an outsider. Tim Foley, a wiry, blue-eyed 59-year-old, moved to town from nearby Sasabe. Foley is the head of Arizona Border Recon, an armed group that tries to intercept immigrants and smugglers in the Borderlands, and also claims to provide “intelligence and security services” to the Border Patrol. He is a well-known figure in the right-wing militia world and, increasingly, in anti-immigrant conservative politics. Last September, Foley gave a speech outside the U.S. Capitol building, alongside several members of Congress and presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway.

Around the same time, other men appeared in Arivaca, either inspired by Foley or by President Donald Trump’s calls to “build the wall.” They used the town as a backdrop for online tirades against smuggling and immigration. Their presence irked those already uneasy with Foley, and set in motion an organizing effort among a small group of locals, who worried about the threat the visitors posed and wondered what to do about it.

Here's the other thing about Arivaca: This wasn't the first time people had come from away to expound on the evils of immigration. And last time it happened, things went badly for the community. Ever since a fateful night in 2009, many Arivacans say some things are not welcome here.



The murders of Raul Flores and his daughter, Brisenia, turned Arivaca upside down. Their house has been unoccupied since.

Andrew Cullen for High Country News

ON THAT MAY NIGHT IN 2009, a woman and man banged on the door of a local home, wielding a handgun, revolver and a duct-taped shotgun. The woman was Shawna Forde, the leader of Minuteman American Defense, a militia that patrolled the Borderlands for migrants. Originally from a Seattle suburb, Forde was also interested in joining the drug trade. That night, posing as a member of the Border Patrol, she entered the home of the Flores family, looking for drugs and money. She and her male companion found neither. Still, they murdered Raul “Junior” Flores and his 9-year-old daughter, Brisenia, shooting Junior in the neck, throat and head, and Brisenia point-blank in the face. The killers were put behind bars, while Arivaca was left with the kind of wounds that never truly heal.

When Tim Foley moved here in 2017, some locals thought Arizona Border Recon sounded a lot like Minuteman American Defense. In Sasabe, Foley had earned a reputation when he threatened to burn down his house after the rent was raised, according to a sheriff's report. “We were warned from people in Sasabe,” says Clara Godfrey, a petite and charismatic 58-year-old, whose family has roots in Mexico, Greece and southern Arizona. “We didn't give him



Clara Godfrey has organized community meetings to discuss the arrival of militia groups to Arivaca.

Andrew Cullen for High Country News

much of a chance,” says Eli Buchanan, 36, who runs the recycling center. “As soon as we found out he was moving here, the town had a big candlelight vigil for Brisenia and made it clear he wasn’t welcome.”

But Foley stayed and continued patrolling the border. “I thrive on using my mind,” he told me during an interview at his home in Arivaca. As border security became a cornerstone issue for the Trump administration, Foley’s longtime anti-immigrant obsession took on new prominence. And in some online corners of the far-right world, so did Arivaca.

The second outsider was a tall redheaded conspiracy theorist named Michael Lewis Arthur Meyer

(<https://www.hcn.org/issues/50.17/politics-conspiracy-theories-inspire-vigilante-justice-in-tucson>), who often goes by Lewis Arthur. In early September, he started livestreaming from Arivaca’s main street to his Facebook followers, claiming that a local humanitarian aid group that helps migrants in need of food, water or medical attention was in cahoots with drug cartels.

“If you’re ever down here,” Arthur bellowed, “if you want to know who helps child traffickers, if you want to know who helps dope smugglers, if you want to know who helps ISIS — any of the bad guys. These people help them.” A woman in a long brown dress approached him. It was Megan Davern, 30, a

local butcher and bartender. Davern had seen Arthur in the bar and realized he was a friend of Foley. As he livestreamed, she asked Arthur what he was up to, and if he was part of a larger group. “We’re only with God,” he replied.

“I would appreciate it if you don’t come in again,” Davern told him.

“Understood,” he said, and continued his tirade.

A few days later, Arthur confronted another bartender downtown, demanding to know why an anti-militia sign had been posted on the door. When the bartender asked him to leave, he made a vague threat to mess with the town’s water supply. As he livestreamed, his Facebook followers encouraged him. Someone suggested burning down the bar.

So Arivacans started to organize. They created a phone tree and helped the bartenders close up at night. Godfrey called a community meeting to urge people to watch out for one another. What the heck was going on? they wondered. Would anyone actually try to burn down the bar — or worse? About 50 people packed the old schoolhouse, and a local cowboy named Huck sat outside to keep watch, in case someone came around with bad intentions.

“I have always been adamant in my belief, since what happened to us in 2009, that these people are nothing but no good,” Godfrey told me. “We have a tree planted for Brisenia. I’m at the point where I don’t need to plant a tree. We need to take a stand.”

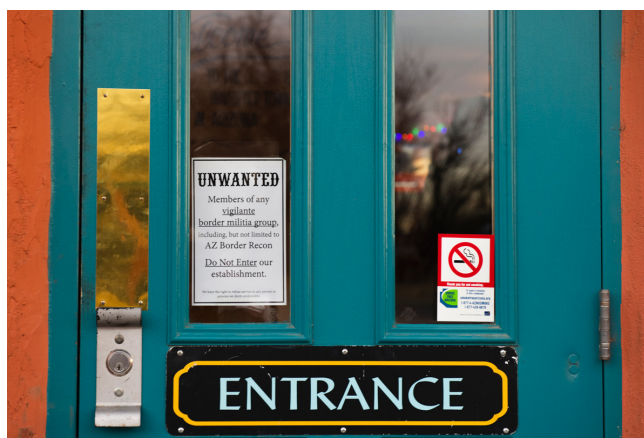


Megan Davern, a butcher and bartender at La Gitana Cantina, has helped organize community meetings in response to a string of confrontations between residents and visiting right-wing activists.

Andrew Cullen for High Country News

Also around this time, Bryan Melchior of Sandy, Utah, arrived, talking about the need to fortify the border. Melchior, who ran a group called the Utah Gun Exchange, was famous for driving the country in an armored vehicle mounted with a machine-gun replica to intimidate gun control advocates at rallies. When he drove the vehicle through Arivaca, he set off a wave of new anxiety. He had been inspired by Trump's calls for a border wall. "We're in town because Trump is going to put the border at the top of the national priorities list again," Melchior said, in a recording made by an anti-militia organizer. He wanted to lease land and start building the wall himself.

Davern was behind the bar when he showed up, carrying an open container of Mike's Hard Lemonade. When Melchior said he sometimes worked with Foley, and started getting into arguments with the bar's patrons, Davern asked him to leave. And then she called another town meeting.



La Gitana Cantina has adopted a no-militia policy.

Andrew Cullen for High Country News

THIS TIME, THE TOWNSPEOPLE CALLED IN OUTSIDE SUPPORT: They invited Jess Campbell to the meeting. Campbell works for the nonprofit Rural Organizing Project in Oregon, which helps communities organize around issues ranging from defunded libraries to hate crimes and far-right extremism. In 15 years of this work, Campbell had never seen such an organized and self-directed community. "Arivaca was very special in that people weren't so terrified of speaking to neighbors. They have a strong social

fabric,” she said. But they wanted answers. “Folks felt their community might be a special kind of messed-up and were trying to understand why this happened to them,” Campbell told me.

At the meeting, she gave a presentation on how militia groups operate in rural areas, and suggested ways to stay safe in the face of threats. She helped Arivacans consider ways to collect and organize information about incidents like the recent confrontations at the bar. And she tried to help them figure out what the real threat was.

Campbell explained that militia groups tend to see themselves as above the law, which increases the risk of confrontation with law enforcement. For example, in 2015, a chapter of the Oath Keepers that had embedded in a rural county in southern Oregon (<https://www.hcn.org/issues/48.2/showdown-at-sugar-pine-mine>) for over two years ultimately led hundreds of supporters in an armed show of resistance to law enforcement at a mining claim.



As the town's only bar, La Gitana's clientele includes ranchers, a ski-industry avalanche consultant, marijuana home growers and nearly everyone else in town.

Andrew Cullen for High Country News

But there was also a more diffuse threat. An armed militia in a small community can be polarizing, forcing people to choose sides. “If they can drive a wedge into the community, or people are very quiet because they’re nervous to speak out, that’s where we see (militia groups) get the strongest foothold and be able to rock and roll,” Campbell said. This happened in Burns, Oregon, during the 2016 armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife

Refuge, she said. Militia groups “tried to twist the arms of whoever was in power there — the sheriff, the (county officials),” Campbell said. When the militia failed to gain support, it demonized local leadership and created divisions in the community.

“That's the playbook,” Campbell said.

After Campbell left, Godfrey, Davern and others monitored social media and kept in touch, sharing information about threats and accusations on a community Facebook page. A woman named Ann Ayers collected internet videos on her computer — documentation for potential harassment claims. Arivacans pestered Facebook to shut down Arthur's page, which the company eventually did.

In their quest to understand why their sleepy downtown had drawn so many threatening outsiders, one common thread emerged: Tim Foley. In November, Ben Bergquam, a California talk radio host with over 100,000 Facebook followers, livestreamed outside the bar. “Good morning, y'all,” he began, donning a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement hat. He trailed off, forgetting the name of the town he was in. Tim Foley stood in the background, smoking a cigarette.



Radio host Ben Bergquam livestreams from Arivaca's downtown, responding to the local bar's anti-militia policy.

Ben Bergquam/Facebook Video Screen Capture

Foley didn't actively take credit for bringing the other men to town. He even distanced himself from Arthur after the man drew too much negative attention online. But Foley had become a magnet for MAGA activists looking for a like-minded tour guide to the Borderlands; Melchior and Bergquam both came in part to meet him.

“I got invited by the one and only Tim Foley ... of Arizona Border Recon,” Bergquam said in his livestream. “If you're coming through Arivaca and you're a patriot, don't go to that bar. Or *do* go to that bar.”

The downtown incidents weren't the worst part. It was the uncertainty about who else might be watching online. Who would show up next, and with what intentions? "Things that were said in anger about our community weren't just said to us," Godfrey said, "but to the world."



Tim Foley outside his home. Foley and a rotating group of volunteers he hosts patrol the desert for illegal migrant and drug activity.

Andrew Cullen for High Country News

AT ITS CORE, ARIZONA BORDER RECON is a three-person organization composed of Foley, his girlfriend, Jan Fields, and a man named Lorenzo Murillo, who also lives in Arivaca. Foley started thinking about immigration issues when he was living in Phoenix in 2006. As the owner of a small construction company, Foley said undocumented immigrants undercut his bids. Then the mortgage crisis hit, and his house foreclosed. Frustrated and broke, he sold his three Harley Davidsons and moved to Sasabe, which straddles the international border. In 2010, he founded Arizona Border Recon.

Today, Foley and Fields host groups of people, mostly white men, for a week or two at a time to patrol the desert for illegal activity. In addition to intercepting migrants, Foley aims to disrupt drug-smuggling routes.

Foley also courts the media: He's received coverage from *Wired*, *Vice*, *USA Today*, and many others. He usually charges news outlets \$200 to tag along on his patrols. (*High Country News* interviewed Foley but did not pay for his time.) *Cartel Land*, a 2015 documentary film nominated for an Academy

Award, compared Foley to the Mexican citizens taking an armed stand against the cartels inflicting horrific violence on their communities. It was great publicity.

[RELATED:<https://www.hcn.org/issues/48.2/showdown-at-sugar-pine-mine>]

That same year, Foley began connecting with right-wing militia leaders. Montanan Ryan Payne and a California man named Gary Hunt recruited him to help establish an organization called Operation Mutual Defense, or OMD. The group dreamed about organizing militia actions across the country — from standing up for ranchers at odds with the federal government and breaking fellow patriot movement members out of jail, to intercepting buses of Muslim refugees in Montana and other states, and interrogating them. Hunt is a longtime rightwing thinker, who described Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh as “the first patriot of the second American revolution.” Payne was a primary militia leader involved in the Nevada standoff between rancher Cliven Bundy and the federal government in 2014. Lingered enthusiasm from the Bundy victory — or as Hunt called it, the great “unrustling” — fueled the creation of OMD.

“That’s the beauty of the border, there’s an active, hot environment that we can conduct real-world operations, where we’re making a difference and at the same time, we’re building cohesion amongst ourselves.”

Foley brought media savvy to the group. He encouraged members not to call themselves “freedom fighters,” since it sounded too aggressive. He recommended “concerned citizens” instead. “Image is everything, and you don’t want to portray that offense,” Foley said at the time. “You want to portray defense.” A series of conversations recorded between the OMD founders reveal that Foley planned to provide a place for people to train for future operations. The group saw Foley and the border as key to building a national militia network.

“That’s the beauty of the border,” Payne said “There’s an active, hot environment that we can conduct real-world operations, where we’re making a difference and at the same time, we’re building cohesion amongst ourselves.”

OMD’s founders also discussed using Lewis Arthur’s Tucson-based group, Veterans on Patrol, to provide tents and cooking facilities if they were to have “an operation like the Bundy Ranch” on the border. OMD discussed taking a stand against the government in Harney County, Oregon, where anti-federal sentiment eventually morphed into the 2016 armed occupation of Oregon’s Malheur National Wildlife Refuge. But Foley told me he ultimately wasn’t on board with the occupation (<https://www.hcn.org/articles/malheur-national-wildlife-refuge-acquitted-convicted-fined-or-free-malheur-sentences>) because it came too close to a government overthrow. “When they started talking crazy, I said, ‘nope, I’m out.’ ” As the 41-day occupation unfolded and then unraveled when state police and FBI apprehended its leaders, Foley stayed home in Arizona, out of the fray.

Foley scoffs at some Arivacans’ fears that Arizona Border Recon or its associates would cause violence on par with the 2009 shootings. “Go into town and shoot people’s doors in? Are you out of your freakin’ mind?” he told me, in his tidy mobile home in Arivaca. And not everyone here minds his presence. Many people told me that if he wants to help Border Patrol stop illegal activity, more power to him. He’s just one more person living his dream.

But to Godfrey and her allies, his connections are troubling. They worry that Foley is becoming a local conduit for national angst, who will only bring more disruption the longer he stays.



Jo Rae Vass, Mary Kasulaitis and Clara Godfrey (sitting) and Dan Kelly and Megan Davern (standing) are some of the Arivaca, Arizona, residents who are working together to combat the militia presence in town.

Daniel Tepper for High Country News

BORDER MILITIAS FIRST GAINED STEAM in the early and mid-2000s. Several made alliances with cattle ranchers who were fed up with migrant traffic across their land and smugglers cutting their fences. In 2000, a paramilitary group called Ranch Rescue formed to help Arizona cattlemen defend their property. After members of the group were arrested for imprisoning and pistol-whipping migrants, Ranch Rescue dissolved. Then, in 2008, a group called the Minutemen Civil Defense Corps set up operations from a ranch 30 miles north of Arivaca. The Corps was Shawna Forde's first real introduction to unofficial border patrols; her Minuteman American Defense was a spinoff.

Today, some Arivaca ranchers are vehemently opposed to the militias. Local ranchers Jim and Sue Chilton had nothing to do with Shawna Forde, but they are vocal about their support for Foley and Arizona Border Recon. One of the

Chiltons' federal grazing allotments abuts the international border in a heavily trafficked smuggling area, Jim says. The Chiltons want Trump's wall and more resources for Border Patrol. For now, though, they have people like Foley, who calls the couple his "biggest cheerleader" in Arivaca.

[RELATED:<https://www.hcn.org/articles/portraits-of-the-arizona-border-recon>]

The Chiltons don't view the 2009 murders as the result of rightwing extremism. "It wasn't really a militia," Sue Chilton said in a video the Utah Gun Exchange posted last fall. She argued that drug dealers orchestrated the killings. Indeed, in court documents, a judge described one of the three found guilty as a dealer who was "plotting to kill (Junior) Flores as a perceived rival in the drug trade." That man was Clara Godfrey's nephew, Albert Gaxiola, who waited outside the home while the first shots were fired.

And yet it's also true that rightwing extremism was baked into the horrific deed. According to court documents, Forde got involved in the trade as a way to fund her Minuteman American Defense, which required transportation and firearms. Jason Bush of Wenatchee, Washington, the man who shot Flores and his daughter that night, was part of Forde's group and a known white supremacist.

All of this makes it difficult to untangle the real threat in Arivaca. If the murders were the result of a drug feud, why not organize against smugglers? Some said that's just not practical. "When you live near a border of any kind, there is smuggling," Mary Kasulaitis told me. "It would happen if you were off the coast of Cornwall in England." Smuggling is an economy as old as the border. People told me it's just a fact of life.

"For the most part, Arivaca has been pretty stable and quiet because they don't want to attract law enforcement," according to David Neiwert, a national expert in right-wing movements and author of a book about Shawna Forde. Militia members, however, threw things off balance, he said. "(Militia) introduce an unstable element that's capable of extreme violence," Neiwert told me. He said militias can become tools for people who need muscle, whether it's ranchers feuding with the government, like Cliven Bundy, or drug dealers. In Arivaca, Neiwert said, "Shawna was basically a lethal tool."

By Neiwert's logic, the late-2018 confrontations had disrupted Arivaca's equilibrium once again. This time, though, there seemed to be little promise of resolution. There were no obvious repercussions, no arrests or court trials as there had been after 2009. Instead, there were lingering questions — and a persistent sense of unease.



Jim Chilton crawls under the U.S.-Mexico border fence along the edge of his grazing allotment, to demonstrate how easy it is for migrants or drug smugglers to cross.

Tay Wiles/High Country News

AFTER THE START OF THE NEW YEAR, Arthur and Melchior faced charges elsewhere for criminal trespassing and guns and drug violations. If the Arivacans' goal was to get people to stop making angry livestreams downtown, "maybe it did work," Wallen said. "Maybe that's what it takes. That each time there is a flare-up, people get together and let their voices be heard. But each time this border war escalates, people in our town get hurt. And we're tired of that."

Experts say border militias don't just have a local impact, but a national one. "Extremely anti-immigrant ideas are now embedded in the White House and our policymaking system," says Heidi Beirich, of the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks hate groups. Beirich says the mobilization of border militias in the mid-2000s helped elevate immigration issues and nativist rhetoric into mainstream politics. "It was picked up by the Tea Party, eventually made its way into the GOP, and we got Trump." Now, the cycle is

coming full circle, with the president fueling the ideas that motivate people like Arthur, Melchior and Foley. "They see themselves as a bulwark protecting Trump," Beirich says of many far-right activists.

"Everybody can have different views, but when views become murder, then I don't want to hear shit about your views."

In January, Godfrey held another meeting at the historic schoolhouse, the fourth such gathering in the last five months. "We have to really be on guard," she warned her fellow citizens. "Everybody can have different views, but when views become murder, then I don't want to hear shit about your views." The group planned to send a letter to the district attorney about the livestreamers and the town's concerns about militia activity. Godfrey wanted the authorities to be aware, in case things went downhill. Word also got around that Foley was interested in buying a piece of land outside of town. In February, Eli Buchanan sold his tractor in order to purchase the land first. In early March, locals reported yet another armed group in town, this time a couple of men who reportedly called themselves anarchists and wanted to confront Foley. Wallen said he and another local man talked them down.

"There's a feeling like we can't let this rest until it's done, and I don't know what that means," Ann Ayers told me. Ayers worries the threat to the town will persist as long as the president continues his inflammatory rhetoric. She still periodically plugs into the Facebook pages of right-wing activists, where the conversation never stops. "It's a weird world," she says. "A couple of weeks ago (I was) talking to some people, and they were like, 'It's all quiet now.' And I'm like, 'But is it?' "



*Arivaca, Arizona, a dozen miles north of the
Mexican border.*

Daniel Tepper for High Country News

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